

# **INTERVIEWS 2010-2017**



**BILL YARROW**

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- **INTERVIEW WITH CLARE MARTIN, EDITOR OF *MOCKINGHEART REVIEW*. (2017)**

**MHR: The title *The Vig of Love* is taken from the title of a poem within the collection. Can you explain the title as you understand it and as it suggests the other poems?**

BY: Vig, from “vigorish,” is the interest on a loanshark’s loan. Love is a debt, a loan you’ll never repay. The poems in this volume are about the different kinds of interest we owe on the impossible loan that is love. P.S. The Muse is also a loanshark.

**MHR: In the title poem, the idea of risk is linked with love. Can you illuminate this idea as it pertains to many of the other poems that also delve into the nature of love in this light?**

BY: The poem suggests love is a roulette bet. Sometimes we win. Sometimes we lose. But if we really love someone, we need to invest everything we have. We need to “put down all we’re worth.” The debt idea is made explicit in the poem “A Debt No Honest Man Can Pay” which begins the volume. The betting idea is made explicit in the poem “Wanna Bet?” which opens the last section of the book.

**MHR: Do you see yourself as a contemporary absurdist? Do you see yourself as a truth seeker with a capital T? Does truth exist? If not, what responsibilities must a 21<sup>st</sup> century poet fulfill?**

BY: I see myself as someone who writes poems. Nothing more. Yes, specific truth exists, and general truths exist. Does Capital T Truth exist? No. Not for me. The responsibility of a poet? To write well.

**MHR: You have a couple of poems, that use bullet points to present statements of “truth” that are slant and wry. What principles link these poems? What are their thematic unifiers?**

BY: These “poems” (I’m not sure what they really are) consist of aphorisms or admonitions about love, pleasure, desire, passion, addiction, obsession. Read them with Samuel Johnson’s caveat: “In all pointed sentences, some degree of accuracy must be sacrificed to conciseness.” The title “Asbestos Candlestick” references the poem “The Exit Towards Fire.” The title “Sticky, Indifferent” comes from a phrase in “Liz@Phil,” a poem in *Blasphemer*

before ten years had passed  
their loneliness had hardened

into indifferent sticky rapture  
and permanent part-time jobs

**MHR: As a poet rooted in the human condition, does man have a chance? And if so, does poetry?**

BY: If we are human, we are “rooted in the human condition.” Poets are no different from anyone else. Everything has a chance—man, woman, humanity, poetry, goodness, beauty, ugliness, evil.... How much of a chance? That depends on the individual. And on the individual depends the world. As Emerson said, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” The future is the collective us.

**MHR: Do you think your poems speak intimately to the reader or does the speaker hold the reader at a distance to instruct? Do you see yourself as a storyteller or a visionary/oracle?**

BY: Every one of my poems intuits a speaker. Every speaker is different. None is me. That is, none is wholly me. My poems all tell stories. I don’t think any sane person ever sees himself or herself as an oracle.

**MHR: There is an exacting sharpness in the language, and throughout we are treated to unexpected word collisions. Do you, as a poet, strive to make the unfamiliar familiar in your language?**

BY: Thank you, Clare. I love that phrase “word collisions.” That’s an excellent phrase to describe a lot of what I do in my poems. In *Pointed Sentences*, my first book, there’s a poem called “Whiplash Marriage.” That title describes my approach and a lot of my work. I’m still smashing sound atoms, still officiating at whiplash marriages of non-consenting words.

I don’t strive to make the unfamiliar familiar exactly. I do solicit the unfamiliar and invite it into my poems. I strive to make the unfamiliar immediate and necessary, accessible and inevitable.

**MHR: In the heart of the collection there seems to be a silent hope, which counters the difficulties of answerless questions in many of the poems. I think the balance is finely struck. Do you sense a light in the darkness?**

BY: I appreciate your comment about balance. Darkness is only darkness because there is light. Light is only light by virtue of there being darkness. As Blake said, “Opposition is true friendship.” No, there is no light in the darkness, but there is always *the potential for light* in the darkness. And vice versa.

**MHR: I am immediately taken by the economy of words and clever turns of phrases, even though these poems embody so much more in**

**their cumulative effect. Can you share with us some of your process in facing a blank page?**

BY: Thank you, Clare, for that characterization of the poems in this book.

I seldom write on a literal blank page. Mostly, I write on a computer screen. I mention this because the size of a piece of paper sometimes affects or even dictates the length of a poem's lines. If you are writing in a pocket notebook, you are likely writing in shorter lines than if you are writing in an oversized folio notebook. The reason is because, as you stare at the tiny notebook page, you are *thinking in* shorter lines, or *thinking in* longer lines if you are looking at a menu-sized blank journal.

The computer screen for me is neutral. It allows me to experiment with short lines, medium-sized lines, long lines, boxy poems, shaped poems, sprawling poems, prose poems, etc. I can immediately see what something looks like without having to rewrite it in a different form or shape. I can also save all the approaches to or versions of a poem.

My process? I play around. I play around with what things sound like, what things look like, how meaning changes with words in juxtaposition with each other, how meaning changes in a line ending or a line beginning. I'm a sculptor playing with the clay of words, sometimes piling bits on bits, sometimes scraping away dross to get at the essential form.

Sometimes, I begin with an event ("The Secret of Belief") or a place ("Ajloun Castle") or a person (John Dillinger / "Noir vs Noir") or a memory ("The Ogontz Branch"). Sometimes, I begin with a word ("Babble") or a phrase ("A Debt No Honest Man Can Pay") or a text ("The Red Wheelbarrow" in "Carlos!"). Sometimes, I begin with a feeling ("Tierra del Fuego") or a concept ("The Man Whose Wife Lived in His Neck") or a pun ("Libby, Lottie, and Carlotta").

Sometimes, the poem just emerges.

For me though, a beginning is just a beginning. I almost never end where I start.

#### THE VIG OF LOVE

Love's expensive. Who can afford it?  
So you borrow from the bad guys, lay  
your body down for collateral,  
but the vig's ridiculous. No choice  
but to pay and pay. Every day it's  
just a matter of interest. You'll  
never even scratch the principal.  
But love's a gamble, right? Sometimes it

comes up red. Other times, it comes up  
black. Go ahead. Put down all you're worth.  
Hope for the really really big score.

#### ASBESTOS CANDLESTICK

- Love: the wound which never heals.
- We say soul mate. We mean self mate.
- Are there any pleasures not intensified by infrequency?
- It takes so much effort to be unhappy—where do people get the strength?
- Marriage is a martini in which misery is the vodka and happiness the vermouth.
- You never fall out of love; you just forget.
- It's rare that we shoot ourselves in the foot. More often it's in the heart.
- There's a succor born every minute.
- Paradise is comparative.
- It's impossible to feel through a scab.
- We say the sun breaks through the clouds when all along it's the wind behind the scenes that is orchestrating the miracle.
- When people talk about solitude, they are just making a virtue out of loneliness.
- Loss redefines need.
- Fire caused by lightning is indistinguishable from fire lit by a match.
- The ostrich puts its head in the sand not to be invisible but so that it won't have to see what's going to happen to it.
- When applied to weather, the words 'failure' and 'success' have no meaning.
- A life lived by whim is a life of nauseating incoherence.
- The ravines are crowded with the corpses of luck.
- Humility, the virtue of the repressed, is just lying.
- The body is text: life is context.
- There is selfishness and there is selflessness: there is nothing in-between.

#### THE EXIT TOWARDS FIRE

the world is black: I ignite  
my eyes and arouse the false  
darkness to jealousy

alone at the flash point  
our longings expunge  
the artificial light

ostracized time grows small  
and cold as the ambition  
of a flame

dark smoke billows from  
the ovens of our hearts: what  
counsel can be found in heat?

lovers are arsonists looking  
for matches: beware asbestos  
it's indifferent to combustion

#### THE SECRET OF BELIEF

I don't believe in symbols  
but there's a hole  
in my living room window  
in the shape of a bird

A hail stone punched out  
the profile outline  
of a nightingale or bluebird  
or blackbird or thrush

Well, I have no idea really  
I can't tell a robin  
from a vulture  
or a seagull from an eagle

A bird of some kind though  
head, beak, torso, tail  
with spindly bird feet  
clearly in the broken pane

Were I a believing man  
I'd almost accept  
that there was meaning  
in the shape of broken glass

But nature has no purpose  
accidents are impervious  
to intelligence  
the random is no icon

Unless there really is a God  
unless unbelief is out of bounds  
unless this is a true calling card  
of the Paraclete

Listen up, archaic torsos—  
here's the secret of belief:  
(but, sssshhhh, it's not for publication)

m i n d  
y o u r  
r e v i s e  
m u s t  
y o u

#### AJLOUN CASTLE

You, my little cat, are brisk and fluid  
I, like an owl, am stiff and staid  
You clambered up the rocks and held out your arms  
The wind in a swoosh came up behind you  
Incredulous, I watched you fall

You did not see me looking  
as you stood placid, impassive  
looking out over the cardamom hills

but then the wind mistook your arms for wings  
and, helpless, I watched you fall

Horrified, I watched you fall  
through the future and into the past,  
past your family, past your accolades,  
past your handsome penchant for reconciliation  
into the universal solvent of your confidence

I saw you dashed upon low stones!  
I saw you bounce into the sea!  
I saw you sink into inky velvet!

My tragedy is that my imagination  
pictures all the facets of disaster

but you see only soaring  
and that is your invincible gift

#### NOIR VS. NOIR

You're sitting in a darkened theatre with Gothic ceilings and one exit watching the latest Alan Ladd film with William Bendix and Veronica Lake. Next to you eating popcorn is a woman from Romania named Anna. She is smiling but at all the wrong scenes. You put your arm around her and smile yourself. Yesterday's plastic surgery has been a complete success. The fingertip skin grafts feel the best they ever have. Bendix, a narrative madness in his eyes, is suffering from a war wound. He holds both sides of his head and bellows, "Turn off that monkey music!" The movie's good, but you don't like being in the dark. You motion to Anna to go, a shade brutally perhaps, and drag her down the aisle. In the lobby, empty but for the concessionaire, she says wait, she has to relieve herself. "Hurry it up," you mutter and pass the time staring at your face in the mirrored walls. It's not your face and that suits you just fine. "Where is she?" you wonder. At that moment she returns. "What took you?" you rasp and begin walking. "Hey, wait," she calls, running up to your side. She's pressed up against you as you push open the glass door and walk out. Something smells funny in the night. It's your future, but no one will be able to convince you of that.

#### BABBLE

We had a family copy of Isaac Babel's stories out of which my dad would read aloud when he was home, which, owing to his employment issues, was very often. I had no idea what I was listening to, but that's just another way to fail to define childhood, I guess. Anyway, the stories were short, some just a page, and I let my imagination sail away on some word that jumped out at me (one always did) and then, for those few minutes, I was outside the battered gates of self, alone in a city empty of rockets and God, where I saw tower after tower of arrested escape.

#### A DEBT NO HONEST MAN CAN PAY

I'm sitting here listening to *Nebraska* and it's breaking my heart not because it's plaintive and brilliant but because it's taking me back to 1982 and our baby—not even two pounds—in intensive care—in New York Hospital—far away—we live in Queens—it's what we can afford—but we see her every day—well one of us does—via the subway—where I sit listening to *Nebraska* and Springsteen is singing about paying a debt no honest man can pay—and I'm thinking *What is that debt? It's marriage, right? It's love, right? It's the privilege of having a kid, right? Not in the song but in life, in someone's life, in my life, it is a debt, a brutally honest debt, but you never pay it back, no one can, not with money, not with time, not with compassion, not with care, not with what I make, not even with what you make, I'm not talking hospital bills, I'm talking what forever can never be repaid* so, listen, you listen to a song whose line hits you in your kidney and you double over as if you're pregnant—a pregnant woman—not close—not close enough to term—but you birth something anyway—and one day it becomes your heart—and then your heart gets pregnant and it gives birth to your future which you learn is made entirely of your past, a past where you are listening to a song, a concept, a whole album, again and again, over and over, the album *Nebraska*, which never gets dull, never gets tired, never gets old.

CARLOS!  
a palimpsest poem

The man and his wife, on vacation, were exploring the desert.

"Armadillos look like they would be lizards but they're not. They're mammals. Gila Monsters, on the other hand, are lizards. And so are iguanas which are domesticable. Nature has *much* to teach us. Would I want one as a pet? Well, that *depends*. It depends upon our status. It all depends on you.

Tired? OK, I promise we'll head back soon. Hey, an iguana lizard! He's headed for a bush covered with *red* ants! The *wheel* is about to come off his bus! Look out, little fella!"

She looked at him with sawed-off pity.

"Did you know that a castrated male pig is called a *barrow*. I had no idea. And that Barrow also is the name of a city thirteen

hundred miles south of the North Pole?"

As she listened, her perfumed eyes *glazed* over.

They stood, he *with* his hands  
behind his back, she with her  
hands across her chest, looking  
across the mesa, lately unlaced  
with *rain*, prisoners of their own dry  
dreams. "It was a mistake to have  
brought you here," he muttered  
to himself. "You're not interested  
in any thing or any one. Just yourself."

Thirsty, she asked him for some *water*.

He handed her the blistered canteen.

Standing *beside* him, she was an elegant  
cipher. What besides her looks had  
interested him in her anyway? Perhaps  
nothing beside his wealth attracted  
her. *The white* clouds began to thunder.  
"More rain, I think," she said, realizing  
that, though meaningful conversation  
had evaporated more than a decade ago,  
they would probably never leave each other.

Out of boredom, she started an inane  
argument. Above the chocolate plain,  
they squabbled abominably. Like *chickens*.

#### TIERRA DEL FUEGO

what I remember most was how dark it was  
at two in the morning and how angry the air  
was at two in the morning and the sound  
of sobbing in the trees at two in the morning

my time there was not one river not one  
evening not one tunnel not one foxhole  
it was not one body it was not one climate  
it was not one of anything but a humbling

my residence was a rain of observation  
and speculation a slim shower of distance  
and insistence in the world and of the soil  
its least reflex and its spongy corruption

when I landed I was frightened but not  
unhappy I was apprehensive but not  
unwilling the land left me with a shadow  
of a longing left me hanging outside of acuity

then denial spoke and refusal erupted

the volatile earth got angry at depression's  
lack of shame and sore abandon became  
an argument I didn't have the energy to win

#### THE MAN WHOSE WIFE LIVED IN HIS NECK

This is the story of the man whose wife lived in his neck. Every morning, he would turn to her and say, "Hello, sweetheart, how was your night?" and she would answer, *Brilliant! What else?* by which she meant she didn't sleep a wink but rather thought unceasingly through the long darkness and solved each of the burdens he would face during his day. In that way, he was protected from harm, and affection toward her swelled in his heart. What a comfort to have his wife not even a muscle away from his attention. Their marriage thrived, but unlike other successful ventures in the world, this one was never in danger of collapse. There would be no shift in interest or intent. Symbiotic happiness was the key, for he continually manipulated and massaged her, touching her where she ached to be touched, kneading her where she needed to be kneaded. Then one day, she informed him that she wanted to move. "Where?" he asked. *To the other side*, she answered. "It won't be the same over there," he cautioned, and it wasn't. From over there, he neither looked nor sounded the same. Something in him had altered and not for the better. She began, though the descent was gradual, to sleep lower and lower. She rested in his shoulder now where he was meatier and where it was harder for him to hear her breathing. Her protection thinned to a threadbare covering, more irritant than asset. He wanted to dig into her, but she was impossible to reach, so deep had she sunk into him. Would it only be a matter of time until she completely dissolved and joined the others in his blood? Who would he look to when, in pain, he twisted and itched? Suddenly, he felt something behind him. She had turned the corner and lodged just below the hair on the back of his head. That felt perfect. That felt so fine. That felt just right. "Hello, sweetheart," he said, "how was your night?" *My night? How was my night? Dazzling! Just Dazzling!*

#### LIBBY, LOTTIE, CARLOTTA

Libby tried divination—no answer.  
Lottie turned to numerology—a big zero.  
Carlotta was interested in philately but she found that sticky.

Stay away from miracles, Libby.  
Do not tattoo the future, Lottie.  
What doesn't kill you will make you cocky, Carlotta.

Biology is destiny to this extent: our bodies  
lead us places we otherwise wouldn't go.  
Darkness is a long arc, my darlings.

No one escapes the entry into dirty sex  
but you control the ugliness of the encounter.  
Pain is *never* love—I don't care what others say.

It hurts my heart to read your poems.  
You deserve a knight, a Christ commensurate  
with your beauty, someone halfway decent.

Listen, there is a place where parents don't drink,  
where uncles don't rape, where brothers don't die.  
Where is it? All I know is it's not on the flood plain.

(These poems appear in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

- **JOURNEY TO THE PLANET WRITE: READING. WRITING. ETC. (2016)**

**Gay Degani: Please describe your writing journey.**

Bill Yarrow: Growing up in a library, I fell in love with reading at an early age.

I should explain.

My dad's business (running a penny arcade on the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland) kept him employed from May until September from early morning to midnight seven days a week. The rest of the year he was home with us. He was a voracious reader and an avid, if indiscriminate, book collector. He would frequent book auctions and purchase whole lots of books. One week, he'd bring home cartons of different encyclopedias. Another week, it would be plays—two or three hundred hardback editions of individual plays. Novels, cookbooks, memoirs, collections of letters, essays, literary history, art books, limited editions, small books in leather bindings, paperbacks of every stripe—our house was a book depository, repository, what you will. Our bedrooms, bathrooms, rec room (that's what "family rooms" used to be called), garage, crawlspace—wherever you went in our house, you'd confront shelves or stacks or boxes of books.

I caught his habit.

I read everything. Everything. And then I bought every book I could afford and started building my own collection. As a teenager in the 60's, I used to go into Center City (that's what Philadelphians call their "downtown") and hang out in this little bookstore on Chestnut Street (or was it Market Street?) called "Reedmore Books." In the back of the store, they had a section of books without covers for ten cents apiece. I found some great books there! Ever read *Nog* by Rudolph Wurlitzer? On the back cover, in giant letters, a blurb screamed, "The novel of bullshit is dead!" (Thomas Pynchon). How could I not buy and not read that one?

The more books I read, the more books I wanted to read. The more authors I learned about, the more I wanted to read everything by those authors. I read like a demon. I devoured book after book after book. I never felt satiated. I never got tired. I could read anywhere—sitting, lying down, standing up, walking, on buses, on trains, on subways, on airplanes, in quiet places, in noisy places, alone, among other people, in libraries, in fields, on public benches—it didn't matter where I was.

People who remember me from college remember me as the boy who always had a paperback in the back pocket of his painter's pants. I was determined to read, along with the reading for my regular classes, at least one extra novel per week. Ah, the optimism of youth!

### **Self Interview**

—Was there one certain writer you read who made you want to become a writer?

—No. *Every* good writer I read made me want to be a writer.

—When did you start writing seriously?

—When people started praising me for my writing.

All it takes is some early praise. And then all it takes is never stopping.

—At what age did you win your first prize for writing?

—Age 20. I won the Academy of American Poets Prize at Swarthmore College judged by Mark Strand.

—At what age did you publish your first poem?

—Age 30. In *Confrontation* or maybe it was *The Antigonish Review*. Same year. I can't remember now which came out first.

—At what age did you publish your first full-length book of poems?

Age 60. *Pointed Sentences* (114 poems) was published by BlazeVOX in January 2012.

—30 years passed between publishing your first poem and publishing your first book of poems. Did you ever get discouraged?

—No.

—30 years passed between publishing your first poem and publishing your first book of poems. Did you ever stop writing?

—No.

—How old are you now?

—65.

—How many books have you published so far?

—Two full-length books of poems and four chapbooks. My third full-length book of poems *The Vig of Love* (79 poems) will be published by Glass Lyre Press on September 24, 2016.

—Are you still writing actively?

—Yes. I write all the time.

## THE OGONTZ BRANCH

There are stories I will not tell, stories I shudder  
to remember. You'll forgive me for withholding them from you.  
You may, of course, not tell me everything about yourself either.

A violation of intimacy? To me it seems its guarantee.  
What I mean is we can tell each other anything,  
but we don't have to. A string is stronger for its knots.

It's not that I prefer living in a house with a locked door.  
That's not what I mean. What I mean is  
did I ever tell you about the Ogontz Branch?

I mean the Ogontz Branch of the Philadelphia Library.  
It was on Ogontz Avenue between Old York Road  
and Limekiln Pike. Thirty years ago, it was old and run down.

It wasn't close to where I lived, but I used to love  
to go there afternoons after school. I'd drive over,  
hang out, read the paperbacks. No one there knew me.

I made friends with the librarian, a young woman  
from Conshohocken with an odd, cocky smile.  
Part of her job was shooing out the boozy bums.

It was in the Ogontz Branch where I discovered *Intimacy*  
by Jean-Paul Sartre. A book of five longish tales,  
the only stories Sartre ever wrote. With eyes blazing,

I devoured them. I ate without tasting, speeding through them  
like a starving man before a meat buffet, but back then  
I read many books I said I loved but didn't understand.

Back then that was perhaps the point—to race through the pages,  
to engulf, to possess the book—that, I felt, was the true thing!  
It would be decades before I understood what I had missed.

If I am a book, I am *Intimacy*. Read me. Wrinkle my pages.  
I am not asking for understanding. If you want to check  
me out, ask the head librarian of the Ogontz Branch.

(This poem appears in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

- **I AM INTERVIEWED BY A COMPUTER (SMASHWORDS INTERVIEW) (2016)**

**Smashwords: What inspires you to get out of bed each day?**  
Bill Yarrow: The call of nature.

**Smashwords: When you're not writing, how do you spend your time?**

Bill: Wondering why.

**Smashwords: How do you discover the ebooks you read?**

Bill: How does one discover anything? Serendipity.

**Smashwords: Do you remember the first story you ever wrote?**

Bill: No. I've never written a story.

**Smashwords: What is your writing process?**

Bill: Have paper. Add pen.

**Smashwords: Do you remember the first story you ever read, and the impact it had on you?**

Bill: Not the first, but I was shaken by Chekhov's "The Bet" because it moved contrary to literature as I understood it at the time.

**Smashwords: How do you approach cover design?**

Bill: Cautiously.

**Smashwords: What are your five favorite books, and why?**

Bill:

1. *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* by Multatuli—best novel ever.
2. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*—best letters ever.
3. *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld* by Peter Handke—best book of poems ever.
4. *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* by Gilbert Keith Chesterton—best work of criticism ever.
5. *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* by Wilhelm Nero Pilate Barbellion—best diary ever.

**Smashwords: What do you read for pleasure?**

Bill: Books.

**Smashwords: What is your e-reading device of choice?**

Bill: A computer.

**Smashwords: What book marketing techniques have been most effective for you?**

Bill: Silence. Exile. Cunning.

**Smashwords: Describe your desk**

Bill: Hard.

**Smashwords: Where did you grow up, and how did this influence your writing?**

Bill: Philadelphia. I write with a Philadelphia accent.

**Smashwords: When did you first start writing?**

Bill: Start writing or start writing seriously? Who can remember!

**Smashwords: What is the greatest joy of writing for you?**

Bill: Making people smile.

**Smashwords: Who are your favorite authors?**

Bill: John Bunyan, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Love Peacock, Isaac Babel, Oliver Sacks.

**Smashwords: How old were you when you published your first book?**

Bill: Sixty.

**Smashwords: What five books MUST every aspiring writer read?**

Bill:

1. *The Iliad* by Homer.
2. *Don Quixote* by Cervantes.
3. *War and Peace* by Tolstoy.
4. *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky.
5. *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert.

**Smashwords: What is the difference between poetry and prose?**

Bill: Spacing.

**Smashwords: What is your favorite bit of advice for writers?**

Bill: "You should only read what is truly good or what is frankly bad."  
(Ernest Hemingway)

**Smashwords: What is your favorite poem?**

Bill: "The Castaway" by William Cowper.

- **MORE QUESTIONS FROM A COMPUTER (GOODREADS INTERVIEW) (2016)**

**Goodreads: Where did you get the idea for your most recent book?**

Bill Yarrow: I found the idea for my most recent book in my mind. I find most of my ideas there.

**Goodreads: What's the best thing about being a writer?**

Bill: The fabulous perks!

**Goodreads:** How do you get inspired to write?

Bill: I don't get inspired to write. Writing comes first. Inspiration comes after.

**Goodreads:** What are you currently working on?

Bill: I'm currently working on a long, on-going project—my life.

**Goodreads:** What's your advice for aspiring writers?

Bill: A good deodorant.

**Goodreads:** How do you deal with writer's block?

Bill: With a hammer and two nails.

- **INTERVIEW WITH NORM GOLDMAN IN BOOKPLEASURES.COM (2015)**

**Norm Goldman: Good day, Bill, and thanks for participating in our interview.**

Bill Yarrow: Hi, Norm. Thanks for including me. Happy to be here

**Norm: How did you get started in writing and what keeps you going?**

Bill: Early encouragement from teachers, contests, and peers pushed me down the path. Inertia keeps me going.

**Norm: How do you feel as to the way language and words are used today?**

Bill: I seethe with rage when I read mottled poems and muddled prose. I long for clarity. Clear thinking as in Johnson. Clear writing as in Boswell. Bunyan is a tonic; Borges, Singer, and Miller intoxicants. I admire true difficulty as in Rilke. I despise the idiocy manifested in pretense.

**Norm: What draws you to express yourself through poetry and what drew you to poetry? As a follow up, what is the source of your poetry? From where do the poems come?**

Bill: Writing draws writing. Art inspires art. Poems come from other poems. But inspiration is everywhere. Poems are only one form of expression for me. They exercise my mind in a certain way. I like the healthy exhaustion I feel after I write one. I like their tightness and conciseness. I like being forced to write tightly and concisely. Writing itself doesn't give me pleasure, but writing well always gives me pleasure. Who is not drawn to pleasure?

**Norm: How would you define a good poem?**

Bill: Good poems are safe poems. Good poems bore me. I don't like good poems. There are too many good poems out there and not enough great ones. As Voltaire said, "The good is the enemy of the best." I'd like to see

more poets swing for the fences. More homers! More grand slams! Push yourselves. Stop being satisfied with base hits. What is greatness? Greatness rewards and repays attention. The more you look at things that are truly great, the more you see.

**Norm: It is sometimes said that people in times of need turn to poetry. Is this true and if so, why?**

Bill: Bad poetry maybe. Poetry as solace? Poetry as comfort? I don't go to poetry for comfort or consolation. I'm trying to imagine people in need turning to Rimbaud or James Tate. I think some poetry (some lines of poetry) may be helpful to people in pain but more likely poetry's medicinal properties are incidental or accidental.

**Norm: Would you say you get clarity about a subject from writing a poem about it? If so, please elaborate.**

Bill: Excellent question, Norm. Auden said that poetry is "the clear expression of mixed feelings." I like that quote, but that's not how I approach poems. I rarely start in a state of confusion so I am not searching for clarity exactly. I guess my game is surprise. I am, in the process of writing, looking to be surprised. When I surprise myself, I am happy. For me, discovery is the real delight in writing poems. New concepts, insights, unplumbed feelings, unplanned narratives, shifts, novel word combinations—things happen in writing poems that, for me, could only happen while writing poems.

**Norm: Has the Internet changed the way poetry reaches people?**

Bill: I don't know if it changes the way poetry reaches people but it definitely has changed the way people reach poetry. The Internet is like an open bank vault: literary riches surround us. Take whatever you want and take as much as you want. It's life in the literary fast lane. Like the line in the Eagles song, "Everything, all the time."

**Norm: Could you tell our readers something about *Blasphemer* and what purpose do you believe your poems serve? What matters to you about the poems?**

Bill: Oh, gosh! Self promotion! *Blasphemer* is a fun book, it's an edgy book, it's an unusual kind of poetry book. It definitely won't comfort you. I wouldn't go to it for solace. You may find parts of it (or all of it!) offensive, but it will definitely make you reconsider what can or can't be a poem as it will encourage you to reexamine all you think you believe.

**Norm: Where can our readers find out more about you and your work?**

Bill: I'm on Facebook, Fictionaut, LinkedIn, Twitter, Goodreads, Scriggler, Smashwords, MacGuffin, SoundCloud, YouTube, Vimeo, academia.edu, and here's my website: [billyarrow.wordpress.com](http://billyarrow.wordpress.com)

**Norm: What is next for Bill Yarrow?**

Bill: I'm working with the composer Ray Fahrner on a CD of music and poetry. The CD is called *Pointed Music* and consists of 38 pieces Dr. Fahrner has composed specifically for readings of poems from *Pointed Sentences*, my first full-length book of poems, which came out from BlazeVOX in 2012.

**Norm: As this interview draws to a close what one question would you have liked me to ask you? Please share your answer.**

Bill:

Q: Who should've been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature?

A: Oliver Sacks.

**Norm: Thanks once again and good luck with all of your future endeavors**

Bill: Thank you, Norm! I really enjoyed your questions.

- **INTERVIEW WITH BLOTTERATURE LITERARY MAGAZINE (2015)**

**Blotterature: Blotterature has a strong connection to our place—industrialized Northwest Indiana—and it is reflected in our writing. Tell us where you are and how your place fits into your art.**

Bill Yarrow: "Where am I?" Good question. I ask myself that daily.

**Blotterature: Who/what impacted your work the most and how does that come through?**

Bill: I try never to think about that.

**Blotterature: How do you generate new ideas for your work?**

Bill: Old texts in a new order = new ideas

**Blotterature: When have you been most satisfied with your work?**

Bill: I never think about that.

**Blotterature: How do you know when a piece is finished?**

Bill: I never worry about that though I also never stop working on my published poems. Improvement has no deadline.

**Blotterature: What has been your biggest failure and what—if any—lessons were learned?**

Bill: If you applied the words "success" and "failure" to the weather, what would they mean? Weather is weather. Life is life. I've learned never to think in terms of success and failure.

**Blotterature: Tell us about your commitment to the writing community. Outside of your work, what else do you have going on? Or what do you see starting up in your future?**

Bill: The composer Ray Fahrner and I are completing a CD called *Pointed Music*, which contains his original music to readings of poems from *Pointed Sentences*, my first book of poetry. I'm also the non-fiction/review editor for *Blue Fifth Review*, a wonderful online magazine.

**Blotterature: What is your biggest pet peeve with the writing community, trends, etc. today?**

Bill: I have none. I'm peeveless.

**Blotterature: What are you working on right now?**

Bill: My marriage.

**Blotterature: What are you reading right now?**

Bill: In bed I'm reading *Unbuttoned* by Northrup Frye (selections from his diaries and notebooks). In my car, I'm listening to the audiotape of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy.

- **[INTERVIEW WITH NICOLETTE WONG IN MEDITATIONS IN AN EMERGENCY \(2014\)](#)**

**Nicolette Wong: How do you blend the sense of humor with lyricism in your poetry?**

Bill Yarrow: I don't know. What can I tell you? I love to laugh. I like to make other people laugh. I like puns, non sequiturs, malapropisms, the absurd. I like pushing the envelope. I like poking holes in the envelope. I like ripping up the envelope and throwing it in the trashcan. Jokes are timing. Jokes are punchlines. So are poems. I like the windup, the delivery, the off-balance pitcher regaining his posture, the ball sailing across or curving into the strike zone. I like the knife-perfect dive. I'm mad for juxtaposition. Words against words. Lines against lines. This against that. The pretty against the ugly. The raw against the cooked. The cooperative in bed with the unruly. The pristine vs. the stained. The rumpled vs. the starched. I just try to write as precisely as I can. A lapidary sentence floats my boat. "Exuberance is beauty." "Energy is eternal delight." Blake is the touchstone, but you know who also is inspiring to read? John Bunyan.

**Nicolette: I've read a fair bit of your poetry in the past few years. One thing I've always admired—the rhythm and sounds move together seamlessly and the momentum is always fitting with the theme. It often ends with a lot of punch. How do you get there?**

Bill: The book that's helped me most as a poet is Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1968 brilliant scholarly study *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems*

*End*. It won't teach you how to write poetry exactly, but it does unpack poems in quite an extraordinary way. It's one of those books like Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* or Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* that is capable of rewiring your brain. It rewired my writing brain. I learned the ending must be the different brother. It's the ribbon that turns the purchase into a gift.

How do I get there? I write in the thrall of the ending. I write backwards. That is, I write from the bottom up. It's what Poe said in "The Philosophy of Composition": "It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give the plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention." I take Poe's advice seriously: always know where you are going. (A draft has only the vaguest sense of the journey. A draft is a map looking for an X.) A poem is a postcard from your destination. The best destination is always a sock in the jaw. I try not to end up in the middle of a muddy field. I try like hell not to end in a nest of pillows.

Re: rhythm, sound, momentum.... Here are my teachers, the elements in my periodic table: Marlowe and Shakespeare. Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Love Peacock. Arthur Schopenhauer and Franz Kafka. Isaac Babel and P.G. Wodehouse. Henry Miller and Edward Dahlberg. Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme. Jorge Luis Borges and Lydia Davis. I read these authors for their sentences. I relish how their sentences end.

Paper : Scissors : Rock :: Alliteration : Assonance : Rhyme.

Paper and alliteration are cheap. Scissors cuts paper and assonance cuts alliteration. Rock and rhyme are dangerous, but what is dominant is not invincible: paper covers rock and alliteration can obliterate rhyme.

**Nicolette: How did you arrive at the formal variety in *The Lice of Christ?* I love its contrarian coherence.**

Bill: I like hybrid cars and I'm attracted to hybrid texts. As I've said, I'm avid for juxtaposition. Juxtaposition of style, tone, perspective, voice, story, form, type, kind, manner, method, approach, material, medium.... I'm interested in texture, heft, collage, collation, kaleidoscopy, the mixed bag. I'm attracted to works of mixed poetry and prose like William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," William Carlos Williams' *Imaginations* (collects five early works including the hybrid *Spring and All*), and Charles Bukowski's *Septuagenarian Stew*. I like works like *Bleak House*; *Winesburg, Ohio*; and *Light in August* that tell more than one story at the same time. I like the polyphony of voice in *Don Quixote*, *A Tale of a Tub* and *Jacques the Fatalist*, the multifarious talk you find in Bowell's *Life of Johnson*, the documentary interpolations of *Max Havelaar* by Multatuli, the incorporation of footnotes into fiction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Sinyavsky's *The Makepeace Experiment*,

and in David Foster Wallace. I don't like books, particularly poetry books, that do the same thing over and over. I like works like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, and Peter Handke's *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld* that do different things over and over. Well, that's what I was trying to do in *The Lice of Christ*.

**Nicolette: What about poets working today? Whose work inspires or resonates with you?**

Bill: When I think about inspiration, I think of the great writers of the past. That spigot has no shutoff valve. Contemporary inspiration more often appears as envy, doesn't it? I try not to go down that road. I admire those writers whose ambition is located not in themselves but in their work. Resonance? Individual poets don't usually resonate with me. Individual poems resonate with me, but that changes with my situation and mood. I've been excited by recent work by Bud Smith, Nick Demske, Darryl Price, Pamela Miller, and John Goode, but that's like plunging my hand into the bucket of good poets and plucking out five of the plumpest plums. There are hundreds of others (I hope you know who you are!) that I should, and wish I could, also name.

**Nicolette: What are you working on these days?**

Bill: More Cranshaw poems, a series perhaps. Three Cranshaw poems appear in *Incompetent Translations and Inept Haiku*. Playing with form, seeing what happens when "found" poems are formalized: "found" clauses and "found" phrases fashioned into sestinas, villanelles, pantoums, etc. I also continue to work on mashups of text of public-domain poems and images from public-domain films—inspired by Italian *fotomanzi* and Mexican *fotonovelas*. I'd like to do something like Harvey Kurtzman did with his *fumetti* in *HELP*, but instead with lines of poetry inserted into characters' mouths.

Where my mind goes, I go. I trust in whim. I work poem to poem. I'm not the kind of poet who decides "railroad" and then writes poem after poem about trains. I trust my poems to figure out how to cohere. My poems are like "the story of the night told over" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which "grows to something of great constancy." I see books of poems like that—discrete poems "transfigured so together" so as to create something "strange and admirable." Theseus knows what's what, but Hippolyta's the better guide. Anyway, I have another book taking shape. It's almost done. As soon as it can walk on its own, I'll let it out the door.

CRANSHAW ENAGGES IN DEBATE

They were discussing reincarnation,  
what animals they would come back as.  
"I'd be a vole," Cranshaw said. *Is a vole*

*even an animal?* Connie asked. "Of course it's an animal! It's the only animal whose name begins with a V. *What about vulture? What about vulpine?*" "A vulture is a bird, not an animal. And vulpine is an adjective, not a noun." *Are you sure? Yesterday, I saw a hive of vulpines in Oxnard.* "Adjacent to the canines, no doubt!" Connie went silent and stared at chain-link fence surrounding the abandoned construction site. Her iPhone buzzed. *I don't care what you say. Canine is a noun. I know it. So is feline. Vulpine must be one too!* "Your sense of reality is highly incidental." *Well, you don't even know that birds are animals!* "What animal would you come back as then, Connie?" *A raccoon with razor teeth and a keen appetite for voles!*

#### CRANSHAW AT THE DINNER PARTY

Cranshaw leans back in his chair and cracks the back leg.  
He sits suddenly straight to hide what he did.  
The hostess steers the conversation to the politics of bullying  
which everyone decides is the nature of the beast.  
Dessert is served—toffee cheesecake  
with kiwi. It begins to hail.  
"What does the future hold?" the hostess asks.  
Says Mark, the wiseguy: "Hands."  
Morrie, the florist, offers: "Opportunity."  
"The reins," insists Bertram.  
"The future holds the reins."  
"Just men?" the hostess queries.  
"No woman has anything to add?" Cranshaw stares  
at the woman whose shawl refuses to cover her breasts.  
He leans forward and touches her knee with his toe.  
"Back!" she yelps. Bertram bellows:  
"The future holds back!  
Hahahahaha! Brilliant!"

#### CRANSHAW ON A BOAT

We are floating on the Chain of Lakes  
eating Rice Krispies out of a bucket.  
The sun is a soft lozenge medicating  
a bright red sky. Water skiers hold  
onto their slackening ropes like love  
itself. On Party Island, the icy drunks  
have seized control. Cranshaw has  
his hand inside Margaret. No one

is shocked, he was born brazen, but  
when he starts in on the Jews, Arnie  
gets mad and pushes him over the side.  
We let him tread water, then swing  
around to pick him up. Justice?  
Regret? No, Margaret wants him back.

(These poems appear in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

- **INTERVIEW WITH DARRYL PRICE IN OLENTANGY REVIEW (2014)**

**Darryl Price: Every artist's process is different. Everyone's process is unique. That's what's so exciting about it. The exploration of the subject, the choices made or unmade in the time elapsed. With Process we are interested in revealing how the creative person arrived at the destination—the point at which the creative journey is complete. What's important are the detours and byways that got to the heart of the matter—the expression, the art. In this series we invite contributors to comment on a particular piece published in the *Oleentangy Review*.**

Bill Yarrow: Our sub-basement flooded, and in the process of throwing away all the things that got ruined because they got wet, I realized how much crap I had collected over many years of being in my house. Thus began the inventory that is "The Basement of Desire." In its original form, the poem had no ending. That is to say, it didn't understand what it was about.

I thought it was about accumulation. Therefore, I wanted the poem to have mass. I wrote the poem in a large block paragraph—very weighty on the page. In that form, the poem was rejected multiple times. At some point, I realized that the poem should be vertical, not horizontal. More like a ladder than a trunk. As I broke the poem into phrases and let it fall down the page, it gained in intensity. I knew I had the right form for the poem, but the poem still was not working. It didn't move toward anything substantial. Perhaps the poem was about divestment. I tried that. That didn't work. When I tried to name directly what the poem wanted to say (or what I thought I wanted the poem to say), the poem got preachy. I had made it into an allegory. It was only when I realized that the meaning of the poem was shifting and not fixed that I found my ending. I made the implicit metaphor of the poem explicit. I moved from list to sequence and from single sequence to recursive sequence. Then, in the last lines of the poem, I realized the four things (relationships, health, sanity, and the past) the poem really wanted to address. When I figured out the order I wanted (arguably chronological), the poem felt done. Why four aspects (childhood, body, marriage, mind)? I was thinking of the "four-fold method" of interpretation of allegory in the Middle Ages ("literal, typological, moral, and anagogical") corresponding to past events, past events connected with present events, present events, and

future events.<sup>1</sup> Why the title "The Basement of Desire"? Well, the poem started with events in my basement, it was about the desire inherent in accumulation, but it was also a bit of a joke. I was punning on and alluding to "The Attic Which Is Desire"<sup>2</sup> by William Carlos Williams, a poem I used to teach but never really understood. Here's Rae Armantrout's reading:

One of my favorite Williams' poems is "The Attic Which Is Desire." This poem does an amazing balancing act; it is simultaneously a realist depiction of an urban scene and an apotheosis of projected desire. I encountered it when I was quite young and discovering sexuality. I understood the poem's narrow, vaginal column of text, transfixed by the ejaculatory soda, as an amazing embodiment. I loved the way the poem was both about orgasm and about seeing the lights of a sign reflected in a dark window. In other words, I liked its doubleness.<sup>3</sup>

She might be right.

Anyway, doubleness, tripleness, quadrupleness—that's poetry for you!

#### THE BASEMENT OF DESIRE

sooner or later you realize  
that all the leftover wood you've been saving  
all the scraps of PVC pipe in the utility closet  
all the plumbing nuggets you've squirreled away  
all the used sandpaper  
loose roofing nails  
railroad spikes  
iron filings  
copper battery caps  
coils of solder  
cylinders of tin  
carafees of glue  
single hinges  
tubs of bulbs  
nylon cord  
bladeless hacksaws  
rusted caulk guns  
bent nails  
blunt screws  
broken hammers  
brittle gaskets  
sleeves of galvanized washers  
leftover shims  
insulation kits  
cans of mineral spirits  
screen door hardware  
drawers of squeeze nozzles

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_Ages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_in_the_Middle_Ages)

<sup>2</sup> [http://mondaypoems.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-attic-which-is-desire\\_15.html](http://mondaypoems.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-attic-which-is-desire_15.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/armatrout/poetics.html>

noxious solvents  
the whole haberdashery of  
sheathing connectors  
and containers  
is just a metaphor  
of shifting meaning

plastic pieces

representing  
sequentially  
and recursively

your childhood  
your body  
your marriage  
and your mind

(This poem appears in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

- **INTERVIEW WITH NIC SEBASTIAN IN THE POETRY STOREHOUSE, REPRINTED IN MOVING POEMS MAGAZINE (2014)**

**Nic Sebastian: Submitting to The Poetry Storehouse means taking a step back from a focus on oneself as individual creator and opening up one's work to a new set of creative possibilities. Talk about your relationship to your work and how you view this sort of control relinquishment.**

Bill Yarrow: I don't believe in private property (alas, I live in a world which does), and neither do I believe in private intellectual property. As far as I'm concerned, anything I create belongs (excluding rights reserved to any and all publishers of the material) to anyone who wants it, and everyone can, with attribution (and respecting publishers' rights where applicable), use it in basically any way he or she likes.<sup>4</sup> So when I found out about The Poetry Storehouse, I was delighted because its philosophy of sharing and collaborative creativity is my philosophy as well.

**Nic: There is never any telling whether one will love or hate the remixes that result when a poet permits remixing of his or her work by others. Please describe the remixes that have resulted for your work at the Storehouse and your own reactions to them.**

Bill: When you send your work out into the world, you are releasing it, you are giving it away. It no longer belongs to you. You can't control how people read it, react to it, interpret it, or, in the case of The Poetry Storehouse, reuse and remix it. I am delighted that other artists found two of the poems I put in The Poetry Storehouse of enough interest and inspiration to fashion

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<sup>4</sup> That is to say, a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial license.  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/legalcode>

from them something of their own. Othniel Smith's fashioned a literal rendition of my poem "Florid Psychosis." I found his video remix an extremely witty and entertaining translation. Nic Sebastian sought a poetic counterpart to my poem "Need" and created (adding her own brilliant reading of the poem as well as a beautifully haunting soundtrack) a mesmerizing video. I was enchanted by her remix. I especially liked that both creators found their material in the Internet Archive, Othniel using film clips from films in the Prelinger Archive, Nic using footage mostly from NASA archives.

**Nic: Would you do this again? What is your advice to other poets who might be considering submitting to The Poetry Storehouse?**

Bill: In a heartbeat! My advice to other poets? Submit your BEST work to The Poetry Storehouse immediately!

**Nic: Is there anything about the Storehouse process or approach that you feel might with benefit be done differently?**

Bill: I just write poems. I don't have imagination for much else.

**Nic: Is there anything else you would like to say about your Poetry Storehouse experience?**

Bill: Yes, two things. 1. The Poetry Storehouse accepts previously-published poems! Do you understand how important, how generous, and how amazing that is? 2. Having your work available to further development and expression (personally, I see it as resurrection) is a great blessing. Being published on The Poetry Storehouse is a munificent opportunity. If you don't take advantage of it, you have only yourself to blame.

### FLORID PSYCHOSIS

On the advice of a friend, I've stopped  
dreaming. As a result, I've developed  
a florid psychosis in which everything  
I've dreamed for the last thirty-three years  
is now real. I have new friends, a new job,  
my dead relatives have all come back, I'm  
half my weight, have all my hair, reside in  
Prague. It's February 1924. Kafka won't die  
until June. Freud's 67. He's just published  
*The Ego and the Id*. My superego refuses  
to read it. Lotte Reiniger is working on  
the cutouts for *Prince Achmed*. I bought  
a radio embroidered with pearls. I tuned it  
to the future, but it only plays the sleepy past.

### NEED

I knew I needed to visit a beach  
made entirely of sharks' teeth

and on that beach I knew I would find  
ivory binoculars left by a vegan birder  
and with those binoculars I knew I could see  
into the windows of a shoreline luncheonette  
and in that luncheonette I knew I'd find  
my step uncle propositioning a leggy waitress  
and I thought of my aunt, her failing eyes  
a thousand miles away on a dirty beach  
looking for signs of onyx-colored birds  
and I knew I had to visit that beach  
for I too wanted to see those birds  
and I had the binoculars necessary

(These poems appear in *Pointed Sentences*, BlazeVOX 2012)

- **INTERVIEW WITH DIDI MENENDEZ IN POETS/ARTISTS (2014)**

**Didi Menendez: It is always interesting to find out what forces led to you realizing you were a poet, is there one seminal event that made that clear for you?**

Bill Yarrow: I don't think of myself as a poet. I just think of myself as a person who writes poems. Seems like I've always written poems.

**Didi: If you could sit in a room with any poet living or dead, who would it be and what would you talk about?**

Bill: I like the company of interesting people. A lot of poets write interesting poems, but that doesn't necessarily make them interesting people. I have no idea whether it would be fun or agony to be alone in a room with Shakespeare or William Blake or Peter Handke. I did have a chance this summer to hang out with the poet Darryl Price who is both great to read and great to talk to. We spent many hours talking together. What did we talk about? Writing. Everything. To answer your question then, Darryl Price.

**Didi: Where do you prefer to write and when?**

Bill: I can write anywhere at any time. It makes no difference to me. I write in my study, in my office, on a bus, on an airplane, in a train, in my car, in the library, in the park, on the beach, in a bar, in a restaurant, alone, in company, in silence, among noise, with peace, with chaos, hungry, sated, thirsty, slaked, elated, despondent, well, sick, feverish, calm, in satori, in hell, anywhere, any time.

**Didi: What poem do you want read at your eulogy?**

Bill: It's hard to imagine anything worse than someone reading a poem (anyone's!) at my funeral.

**Didi: What is the saddest poem you've ever read?**

Bill: The Book of Job. That happy ending always depresses me SO!

**Didi: What will you never write a poem about?**

Bill: That's like the Cretan liar paradox. There probably are many things I will never write about, but I don't know what they are, for that's not in my control. I write about what I write about. But to name the subject of the poem I would never write? Well, how could I then not write that poem? If I named it to myself, I'd have to write it. As in, try not to think about giant hissing cockroaches.

**Didi: Poets are generally solitary people, how do you maintain a sense of community?**

Bill: I got married.

**Didi: How has social media affected your work?**

Bill: It hasn't affected the production of my work, but without social media, I wouldn't know you, and you wouldn't know me. Times infinity.

**Didi: W. H. Auden's once wrote "For poetry makes nothing happen," What are your thoughts on that?**

Bill: Well, it is always a mistake to take a line from a poem as an expression of a poet's true thought. The line comes from Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." In the poem, "poetry makes nothing happen" because "Ireland has her madness and her weather still." In other words, Yeats's poems made nothing happen. Politically. But talk to any number of poets for whom Yeats (or Eliot or Ginsberg or Plath or Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen or Patti Smith or...or...) was a decisive influence, and then reconsider whether "poetry makes nothing happen." Or read the line another way—poetry makes nothing happen. That is, it brings forth "nothing" into the world. But what is that nothing? The "Nothing that is not there"? Or "the nothing that is"? ("The Snow Man," Wallace Stevens). Or the nothing "At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is"? ("Burnt Norton," T. S. Eliot). Auden does say at the end of the stanza where his quote appears that poetry "survives" and is "a mouth." Does a mouth "make nothing happen"? I wouldn't say so. And Auden also says poetry is "A way of happening." Now, that's an interesting choice of words! Poetry "makes nothing happen," but it is "a way of happening." How can poetry be both? Only the true poet knows! And that true poet is William Butler Yeats who understood that it is impossible to tell "the dancer from the dance" ("Among School Children"). In the same way, "happen" is stitched indelibly into "happening." And there the dance is!

**Didi: Who or what is your muse?**

Bill: Good writing.

- [\*\*INTERVIEW WITH SAM RASNAKE IN BLUE FIFTH REVIEW\*\*](#)

**(2013)**

**Sam Rasnake: What do the five poems you published in the Poet Special issue of *Blue Fifth Review* ("We Don't Need No Education," "Cento," "The Clod and the Pebble," "The Concord of This Discord," and "The River of the Parched Spirit") have in common with each other?**

Bill Yarrow: In "The River of the Parched Spirit," I was playing around with a specific type of metaphor that I call the A of B. Shelley's "the thorns of life" from "Ode to the West Wind" ["I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"] is a famous example. Allegorical works are rich sources of these phrases, e.g. "Bower of Bliss" in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* or "Slough of Despond" in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Though the appeal of bald allegory faded, the appeal of these kinds of phrases never did. You find them everywhere: from Ginsberg's "Howl" ("windows of the skull," "the lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago," "the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism," "the three old shrews of fate," "the last gyzym of consciousness") to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech ("great beacon light of hope," "seared in the flames of withering injustice," "still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination," "lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity"). To me, they are the essence of poetry in that they unite an abstraction (the B term) with something concrete (the A term). That's what I see as the work of all poetry, whether specific poems employ these kinds of phrases or not.

The form has been much parodied, as in the Jack Clement song "Flushed from the Bathroom of Your Heart," popularized by Johnny Cash or Paul Craft's "Drop Kick Me Jesus Through The Goalposts of Life," popularized by Bobby Bare. Here are the opening stanzas of each:

From the backdoor of your life you swept me out dear  
In the bread line of your dreams I lost my place  
At the table of your love I got the brush off  
At the Indianapolis of your heart I lost the race

---

Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life  
End over end neither left nor to right  
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights  
Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life.

In my poem, I wanted to see what would happen if one lined up serious examples of these kinds of metaphors side by side. Could discrete and diverse examples form a narrative? Would they just fly apart or could they cohere?

Coherence is what I was after in "The Concord of This Discord" whose title comes from a line in Act V scene 1 in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Theseus: "How shall we find the concord of this discord?" The coherence I sought was formal. Of course, the poem, like "The River of the Parched Spirit," is composed entirely of metaphors. To write "love is a skein / unwound" is just an inverted way of writing "the unwound skein of love." Back to the A of B again.

"Cento" (another way of saying "found poem") has an A of B metaphor ("the Oblivion of Ingratitude") in the first line, but only if you read "Oblivion" as concrete, which I suppose it could be. I always thought of it as abstract as in Dylan's "the waters of oblivion" from "Too Much of Nothing." I love that phrase; it haunted a lot of my composing. Then I visited the Detroit Institute of Art and, upon seeing John Martin's alarmingly great painting "Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion" (1812), realized the phrase had been around a lot longer than I thought! I still like it anyway.

The poem, random lines grabbed from one essay of Sir Thomas Browne (it was Borges, by the way, who led me to Browne), rather than pinning the abstract to the concrete, moves intentionally from generalized ideas in the beginning to particularized images at the end: from "Pleasure" and "Avarice" to "Glasses" and "poyniards."

William Blake wrote "The Clod and the Pebble" and put it in *Poems of Experience*. It's one of a number of concretely allegorical poems (see also "The Garden of Love" and "The Human Abstract") in that volume. The phrases in my concluding couplet look like A of B metaphors: "the stiff ego of the pebble," "the soft haughtiness of the reddish clod." They look like A of B metaphors but they are not; they are not metaphors at all. Reversing the concrete and the abstract terms in A of B phrases changes the phrase from metaphor to noun and possessive adjective: "the soft haughtiness of the reddish clod" = the reddish clod's soft haughtiness; "the stiff ego of the pebble" = the pebble's stiff ego. Anthropomorphism, allegory's cousin.

"We Don't Need No Education"—title from Pink Floyd. A of B metaphor ("an ineffable dance of unlikelihood and redress") made ornate, that is to say, surreal. Puns abound. As in Montaigne.

What do these five poems have in common? What Hamlet said to Polonius: "Words, words, words."

#### THE RIVER OF THE PARCHED SPIRIT

patriotism  
said Johnson

is the last refuge  
of a scoundrel

folly  
said Blake  
is the cloak  
of knavery

religion  
said Marx  
is the sigh  
of the oppressed

anxiety  
said Kierkegaard  
is the dizziness  
of freedom

music  
said Shaw  
is the brandy  
of the damned

the river  
of the parched spirit  
waters the desert  
of the thirsty word

#### THE CONCORD OF THIS DISCORD

-Love is a bottle  
    unopened  
-No, love is a skein  
    unwound

-Love is a portrait  
    unpainted  
-No, love is a road  
    newly paved

-Love is a rushing  
    of blood  
-No, love is talking  
    in tongues

(This poem appears in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

#### CENTO

1. Annihilate not the Mercies of God by the Oblivion of Ingratitude
2. Punish not thyself with Pleasure
3. Be not a *Hercules furens* abroad, and a Poltroon within thyself
4. If Avarice be thy Vice, yet make it not thy Punishment
5. Owe not thy Humility unto humiliation from adversity
6. Make not the consequence of Virtue the ends thereof

7. Love is not to be made by magnifying Glasses
8. *Cato* is much to be pitied who mangled himself with poyniards

(This poem appears in *Blasphemer*, Lit Fest Press 2015)

#### THE CLOD AND THE PEBBLE

*after William Blake*

“Lightning has more longevity than I,”  
said the clod. “That,” said the pebble  
“is what comes of not being hard.”  
“Hardness is just not in my nature.”  
“Then accept your fate: you will be crushed  
into mud, while I will retain my form.” “Yes,  
you will retain your form and that ensures  
your fate: to be shot from a slingshot  
at sparrows, to skim forever the surface  
of a pond, to be a bitter irritant in a shoe.  
But I, I, am part of a larger whole. I will build  
a house, I will dam a stream, I can be a salve.”

The stiff ego of the pebble—indistinguishable  
from the soft haughtiness of the brutish clod.

#### WE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION

You were sitting with your vexed complexion,  
your dour shoulders, your hoarse aloneness  
in the front row of my English for Unwed Mothers  
class, and I hadn't yet read your essay on “Miscarriages  
of Injustice,” nor had you read Montaigne's “That Men  
Are Justly Punished for Being Obstinate in the Defense  
of a Fort That Is Not in Reason To Be Defended,” and it  
wasn't yet Thursday 2004 when we would be sitting  
on the curb in front of The Sikh Community Café  
where you were telling me, “The body is a lost temple  
of bliss and blister,” and the smile on my face was palpably  
inapt, and I blurted out, “There's an ill energy that emanates  
from your precise heart that I find attractive,” to which  
you replied, editing me with a surgeon's cruel disinterest,  
“You mean it's an attractive ill energy,” and I said, “Yes,  
that's what I mean,” though that wasn't at all what I meant,  
and the sun was pursuing the moon in an ineffable dance  
of unlikelihood and redress, and you were wearing  
your father's shoes though I remember thinking what  
large feet you had, learning later that that was unfair  
and untrue, learning later that your heart, like all hearts,  
was fuzzy, not precise, that your candor was a sham,  
that you were neither a mother nor unmarried, that my  
interest in you was not interest at all but usury, that I was  
a man not in full but in fullness, a false Montaigne,  
whose chin beard, though elegant, was the merest bravado.

(This poem appears in *The Vig of Love*, Glass Lyre Press 2016)

- **THE HUE INTERVIEW WITH MATT POTTER IN PURE SLUSH (2012)**

**Matt Potter: What is your favourite colour? Why?**

Bill Yarrow: Green. Green becomes me.

**Matt: Do you wear this colour? How often and when?**

Bill: Yes. Every day of the year except on March 15.

**Matt: What does the colour suggest to you?**

Bill: Happiness.

**Matt: What does it not suggest to you?**

Bill: Infertility.

**Matt: How long has it been your favourite colour?**

Bill: Since August 1996.

**Matt: When does it work best?**

Bill: Late afternoons.

**Matt: When does it not work for you?**

Bill: When I'm under water.

**Matt: How does the colour relate to you, or you relate to it? Are you this colour or is this colour you?**

Bill: I am a photosynthetic personality. There are moments when we are inseparable.

- **INTERVIEW WITH DEREK ALGER IN PIF MAGAZINE<sup>5</sup> (2012)**

**Derek Alger: Congratulations on the recent publication of your poetry collection, *Pointed Sentences*.**

Bill Yarrow: Thanks, Derek. I'm very happy that Geoffrey Gatza and BlazeVOX published *Pointed Sentences* in January. It's a handsome volume and is a representative collection of one hundred and fourteen of my poems written mostly over the last three years—a prolific period in writing and publishing for me.

**Derek: The poet Tony Barnstone describes you as "the Sun Tzu of verbal warfare" and "the Machiavelli of mental strategy" in referring to *Pointed Sentences*.**

Bill: I appreciate it and think it was very generous of him. I think he's referring to the fact that my poems routinely pull the rug out from under the reader, move in unexpected directions, create a kind of reading and thinking whiplash. My poetic strategy seems to be that of the change-up, off-speed

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<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in *Beginnings: How 14 Poets Got Their Start* by Derek Alger (Serving House Books 2015).

verbal pitches, an impetus to the unanticipated, continual (when I can manage it) surprise.

**Derek: You've published chapbook collections of poetry, but obviously with experience your poems are more accomplished now.**

Bill: There's no direct relationship between experience and accomplishment. It would be great if there were a constantly upward curve in terms of a writer's development, but it's not straightforward progress. Novice poets can write brilliant as well as jejune poems; experienced poets are quite capable of writing crap even at the height of their ability, even as they produce works of genius. Wordsworth is the perfect example of the inconsistent great poet. But if you mean that as experience fades and ripens, poets are better able to process experience and shape it into a successful story or poem, then I agree with you. And so did Wordsworth: "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." I completely agree with him. It takes me a long time—in some cases, decades—to process certain experiences. Tranquility can take a lifetime. With certain experiences, it may never come.

**Derek: As a kid, the word amusement had a different meaning for you than it had for many.**

Bill: Right. I grew up in an amusement arcade. My dad owned and ran a penny arcade on the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland, from 1947 to 1977. I spent every summer there, playing Skee-ball and pinball as a child, then working for my dad and running the business as I got older. A utopia that became a dystopia.

**Derek: You grew up in Philadelphia.**

Bill: Yes, we lived in the Philadelphia suburbs and my dad was home with us for most of the year. He went down to Ocean City in late May and my mom brought me and my three sisters down after school let out in June. We stayed down there for the summers and closed up in early September to return to Philadelphia for the start of public school.

**Derek: What were summers like at the amusement arcade?**

Bill: I met all kinds of colorful people and had a lot of singular experiences, but I look back on my summers mostly with horror. Ocean City is a wonderful place with a large, beautiful, white beach and much to offer. People who go there to vacation have a wonderful time. But when I was there, I didn't vacation; I worked—and not as a casual summer employee but as a permanent worker, the boss' son—and that made all the difference. Summers were traumatic for me. Working from 8:00 AM to midnight or 1:00 AM seven days a week all summer was grueling. Dealing with the arcade employees and with the customers (in this case, the entertainment-starved clientele that frequented a beach resort like Ocean City) was a nightmare. At

least it was for me. I was thankful when Ocean City ended—returning to high school and later college felt like an escape into paradise. I've just started in the last few years (that's over thirty years later!) to write about it. The handful of poems in *Pointed Sentences* that reference or directly confront Ocean City ("The Beaded Sheathe," "After the Shark" "Salt Thought," "Great Moments in Blindness," "Mussel Memory," "Ossian City," "George") just begin to rattle the scab of the wound. I'm clearly not done with that subject in my poetry. In fact, I'm still processing a lot of those adolescent and post-adolescent experiences.

**Derek: I'm sure there are some good memories of Ocean City?**

Bill: MANY good memories. My best friend's father ran the frozen custard stand. We'd have free frozen custard at his dad's place and then go and play free pinball for hours and hours at my dad's. What could be better? Then we grew up. No one gets to stay in Eden forever.

**Derek: Fortunately, you were encouraged to read by your parents.**

Bill: Our house was *filled* with books. My dad was an amateur book collector, frequenting auction houses, buying up big lots of books of all kinds on all kinds of subjects. I read widely and ravenously. Maniacally! Since my dad was home during the school year, he and my mom often went to plays. Playbills everywhere!

**Derek: You were a natural for college.**

Bill: Environmentally favored and genetically predisposed. I was a good student. I went to Swarthmore College where I took a lot of comparative literature classes, wrote poetry, won some prizes, got a degree in English literature.

**Derek: Being a poet was not as easy as you thought.**

Bill: No, but early encouragement goes a long way. It fuels me even today. There was a long stretch of years though when no one was interested in my poetry. I kept writing anyway.

**Derek: You ended up stepping out into the wider world.**

Bill: Along with everyone else.

**Derek: After college, you went to Israel soon after the Yom Kippur War and ended up as a volunteer on a kibbutz near the Lebanese border, and then traveled about Europe.**

Bill: So many people had similar if not identical experiences. I tried to write about this time in my life; I kept journals and filled notebooks, but I was unsuccessful. I didn't understand how to make use of my experience. I squandered a great opportunity. The first of many squanderings. Shakespeare has Richard II say, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste

me." I came home with a lot of stories but ultimately empty handed and empty. I slumped back to Ocean City.

**Derek: One major opportunity wasn't squandered. You fell in love while corresponding with a woman you met on kibbutz.**

Bill: Yes, I fell in love. And that love saved me. But then love is everyone's salvation. Two writers fall in love through letters they write to each other. Imagine that! And then we got married a year and a half later over spring break in graduate school where she studied journalism and I got my MA in English literature, taking comprehensive exams in Renaissance and 18th century literature. Johnson and Boswell became late enthusiasms. After graduation, we moved to New York, where I began teaching. And then we had two kids. And then we moved back to Chicago. And then I continued teaching. And then we had another kid. And then. And then. And here it is over thirty years later. And my kids are grown, and my wife and I just celebrated our thirty-sixth anniversary, and I am still teaching. Life. It's funny that way.

**Derek: How did you develop an interest in film?**

Bill: I was completely turned on by seeing films by Fritz Lang, Jean Renoir, Ernst Lubitsch, Jean-Luc Godard and others in T. Kaori Kitao's film study class at Swarthmore in 1972. Completely eye-opening and mind-blowing! I later took Alfred Appel's class in film noir at Northwestern. When I had the opportunity to teach film at Joliet Junior College, I grabbed it. I offer my film class each semester both in a face-to-face version and also online. I use a lot of public domain films (see The Internet Archive: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) ). I'm a fanatic for film noir, silent films, and lesser known/obscure films (see my film blogs: <http://byarrow.blogspot.com/> and <http://billyarrow.blogspot.com/>). Some of my favorites: *The Man Who Laughs* (Leni), *He Who Gets Slapped* (Sjostrom), *Cause for Alarm* (Garnett), *The Man Who Cheated Himself* (Feist), *Woman on the Run* (Foster), *Sudden Fear* (Miller), *The Blood of a Poet* (Cocteau), *La Chinoise* (Godard), *The Amazing Quest of Ernest Bliss* (Zeisler), *Impact* (Lubin), *Love Me Tonight* (Mamoulian), *Nazarin* (Bunuel), *Zoo in Budapest* (Lee). I like so many! Hard to pick.

**Derek: You also teach Shakespeare.**

Bill: And creative writing. And contemporary literature. And world literature. And composition. And developmental writing. I've taught (but which teacher hasn't?) many, many courses over the years.

**Derek: What relationship do you find between teaching and writing?**

Bill: Teaching allows you to understand the difference between the bad and the poor, between the poor and the good, between the good and the great. It educates your palate. It develops your taste. It forces you to cross borders. It

requires you to think things through. It is simultaneously a telescope and a microscope. What I know about writing, I know from teaching. I don't believe in imitation but I do believe in models. I take ALL the great writing of the past as my model. I don't discriminate. I read everything and everyone. Writing is knowing. But I don't feel I really know anything until I've taught that thing. Teaching is humbling. It puts you face to face with greatness and dares you to back down. Writing is humbling too. It puts you face to face with what you know and dares you to walk away. I've tried not to walk away.

#### AFTER THE SHARK

after the shark  
washed up, a man  
with a hammer and a man  
with a plank ran yelling  
and killed it thirty times  
upon the dulling sand  
and as its brackish spasms  
stopped, the crowd  
began itself to itch  
unnerved to have seen  
    a shark a shark  
come swimming from the  
sea, upon the swarming  
land where the bathers  
rise in a basking mass  
smiled at death and each  
dispersed, each to his  
secret dream of the thing  
each to personal seething  
prey to fey imagining

I would have thought  
the darkness of it  
enough to caution  
their want of the waves  
but they grew again  
brave. within minutes  
of their fear. and then  
everyone, brazenly,  
ran back and leapt  
oblivious into that sea

#### OSSIAN CITY

I can still hear  
    the shriek  
of the Laughing Lady,  
    the crash  
of a bucket of dimes,

the waves  
against the jetty at noon

I can still see the boardwalk  
empty with cyclists at 8 am,  
at noon  
clogged with seagulls,  
at midnight  
crowded with the ghosts  
of sleeping old people

I can still hear  
the whir of rusted tackle  
on a new marlin boat,  
the drip of cherry syrup  
onto a cone of crushed ice,  
the scream of teens  
dizzy for foam dice

I can still smell the greed  
of the hard sell,  
fresh cigar ash in the sea,  
the mildewed freezer  
in the dirty pool hall,  
the vinegar stink  
of peanut-oil fries

I can still hear  
the sinister click  
of Zippo lighters,  
the Chesterfield voices  
of the Pokerino widows,  
the oily patter  
of pock-faced shills

I can still taste the flounder chowder  
served by hairnet waitresses  
to foul-mouthed barbers  
at City Lunch  
while in the alley  
black men carted ice  
on their naked backs with tongs

But most on sun-starved nights  
I smell the foaming  
German shepherds  
locked in cages  
under the pier  
and the unworldly perfume  
of the pony-tailed girl  
who played alone with darts

**GEORGE**

Skinny guy with glasses sent to Vietnam,  
came back with an understanding of heroin  
an acquaintance with whorishness, a clarified  
wife, and a helmet on his soul. His family alive  
but indifferent, he makes his way back  
to the ocean, back to the popcorn, back  
to the pinball machines, wants to see  
the boss who had treated him well. "Hey,  
Bob! It's me, George!" Kindness is magnetic,  
but the past is a loose adhesive and rarely  
is employment a glue. "How nice to see  
you, George!" He hangs around for about  
an hour, then slinks back to the deserted  
battlefield he has had tattooed on his future.

(These poems appears in *Pointed Sentences*, BlazeVOX 2012)

- **INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN TEPPER IN FICTIONAUT (2011)**

**Susan Tepper: Bill, some poems linger taking their time opening, while the portal into your dreamlike poem "Son of Goya" has a striking immediacy:**

My father paints walls  
My father paints walls  
because the daylight is malignant...

**Malignant, used in such close proximity to the images of paint and sunlight stirs this poem in a way that feels dangerous.**

Bill Yarrow: The poem opens with the "daylight" (not the sunlight) being "malignant" because for Goya being in public was dangerous. He had strained relations with the King (Ferdinand VII) and feared for his life. "Malignant" also functioned for me as a reference to my father's cancer (he had just been diagnosed with cancer at the time of writing this poem). So, yes, there is a feeling of danger and lurking death as the poem begins.

**Susan: I felt the poem had to be operating on a personal level, too. The repeated line "My father paints walls" is such a strong physical image. Besides Goya, I was getting a man who is not an artist painting the surface of walls. Spreading paint (himself) across time and what is left of time. A left imprint on the future, from out of a son's desire.**

Bill: Yes, your intuition about the poem being personal is exactly right. The poem is about Goya and his son but also about my father and me. My father was not a painter exactly, but he was handy and good with tools. I have many memories of my father with a paintbrush painting the walls of the penny arcade he owned and ran on the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland, from 1947 to 1977. Stanzas two to four are about the artist Goya, but they

are also about my father suffering from the effects of mesothelioma. The "private darkness" in stanza five refers to them both.

**Susan: Spreading paint (himself) across time and what is left of time. A left imprint on the future, from out of a son's desire.**

Bill: Susan, that is very well said. Yes, painting oneself across time—that's a good definition of writing also. I tried to make painting and writing equivalent in the poem.

**Susan: This is a deeply sensual poem that reflects Goya's work which always struck me as mystical but also sensual and earthy and abundant. Your poem is all of that, and more. You end the first stanza with "because time's wife spits through cracks." Profound. It raised the hair on my arms. Can you recall the visual image or a feeling that came to your mind when those words were written?**

Bill: I wrote the poem a long, long time ago in 1977 when I was twenty six. I remember the image just coming to me at the time. In fact, that whole stanza just came to me in a rush. When I wrote poems back then, I didn't work from visual images. I almost always worked from the sounds of words, the assonance of "time's wife," the consonant play in "spits through cracks." Some of Goya's work is mystical, but the Goya referred to here is the old man Goya who, alone in his house outside Madrid, painted fourteen paintings (the Black Paintings) on the walls of his rooms.

**Susan: You numbered the stanzas one through seven. It sets them off perfectly. I wondered if seven was chosen for any particular reason or if the poem just landed that way?**

Bill: Interesting question! Originally the poem had nine parts. I edited it and edited it over the years as it came back from magazine after magazine. I could never get it quite right. I got it down to eight stanzas. Still didn't work. Finally, in desperation of ever getting it published, I put it on The Woodshed in Fictionaut in November 2010 where Sam Rasnake saw it and brought it into his creative writing class and shared some of the comments of his students with me. Their comments and Sam's help were invaluable. I saw through their gifted eyes that one of the stanzas was just killing the poem. I eliminated it, made a couple of small changes, and Sam graciously took it and published it in *Blue Five Notebook* in January 2011. Anyway, the number seven has no meaning except that it's half of fourteen (the number of Black Paintings and the number of lines in a sonnet)!

**Susan: Cool! In stanza number three you write:**

The King has commanded  
... to scratch  
envy's initials on his heart  
with a pebble and a rag.

**Envy. Cruelty. Misery. War. The beat goes on. I've heard tell we are in the same play over and over and just the costumes get changed.**

Bill: Yes, paraphrasing Aristotle, history is what happened; fiction is what happens. Happens over and over. Emotions never change. The human story never gets boring. As Pound says: "Literature is news that STAYS news." All those productions of Shakespeare plays in which the plays remain the same but the costumes and the sets are continually changed!

**Susan: Bill, in stanza number six you write:**

I am not against the darkness.

**Well, that line broke me. A thought: Goya / Father / Son = Triptych (3 panel painting). Do you see any parallels?**

Bill: The idea of the triptych is a good one, but which father and which son? Goya /God / Jesus? Or Goya / his son Xavier /the author of the poem? Or Goya /my father /me? There are a lot of possibilities, I think.

And what kind of darkness? Shadow? Satan? Sin? Melancholy? The darkness of some of the paintings? Saturn devouring his son, for example. What did Goya's son think when he came home and saw that particular image on the dining room wall? He thinks, I am not exactly against all this (it is art, after all), but what happened to my father?

**Susan: In stanza number seven:**

Last week I returned home  
and entered the house of a deaf man

I entered the house of Goya the painter...

Bill: "The house of a deaf man" is the literal translation of La Quinta del Sordo, the name of the house where Goya lived and painted the Black Paintings. He was seventy four when he painted them. He was literally deaf. In the poem, I tried to suggest that he was figuratively deaf as well.

**Susan: Bill, I don't know which three on the triptych either. Only that you've written a poem that feels essential.**

Bill: "feels essential"... Thank you, Susan! I'm just happy that it works.

SON OF GOYA

1.

My father paints walls  
My father paints walls  
because the daylight is malignant  
and his eyesight is benign  
because dead trees mock him

because death's weather  
courts him, because time's wife  
spits through cracks

2.

He has lost all worldly goods  
all physical money. Where are  
the friends to comfort his idleness  
or cure his fear?  
The accumulation of humanness  
choke his breathing, yield no rest  
All time is his  
He paints his walls

3.

The King has commanded  
his demise, vowed to  
make my father wear  
an axe, to scissor  
his eyes, set fire  
to his skin, all to scratch  
envy's initials on his heart  
with a pebble and a rag

4.

Because his nails are too short  
his strength too weak  
his breaths too hurried  
his bones too frail  
his heart unsure to take his hands  
and paint their fates  
he paints his walls  
My father paints walls

5.

On the walls are monsters  
cities, men, gods. Murderers  
pilgrims, a witch, a spy  
Two rifles, a woman, a dog  
in the sand. These I see  
These he lives. Poor Father  
Housed in a private darkness  
Alone on another earth

6.

I am not against the darkness  
I can learn to live with restraint  
but nothing moves here in the ink  
and nothing speaks. Nothing speaks  
in terror of its voice, nothing but  
the oily voice of my father  
animate in the darkness  
where all things hold their breath

7.

Last week I returned home  
and entered the house of a deaf man  
disenfranchised of patrons  
beyond the vile hearing of the world  
I entered the house of Goya the painter  
self-abandoned, deaf to light  
I entered the house and saw Goya  
sitting in misery, swallowed by darkness

(This poem appears in *Pointed Sentences*, BlazeVOX 2012)

- **INTERVIEW WITH JOANI REESE IN CONNOTATION PRESS: AN ONLINE ARTIFACT (2011)**

**Joani Reese: You recently took a trip to India. One of the poems in this group, "A Journey of Seven Thousand Miles" is informed by that experience. How important is it for a writer to immerse him or herself in other cultures?**

Bill Yarrow: Well, Thoreau traveled extensively in Concord. That is to say, he never went anywhere. Geographically, I mean, but he went everywhere observationally. It doesn't matter where you are or where you go; it's all about looking: looking at what's around you, what's behind you, and what's inside you. Samuel Johnson said he liked to travel because it gave him new ideas. I think India was like that for me. My wife and I were fortunate to be able to be there for ten days last March. I loved being in a new culture. It opened my eyes. The importance of being in another culture? Well, it helps you better see your own.

**Joani: After years of publishing pieces in the online and print world, you have a first book, *Pointed Sentences*, coming out shortly. Congratulations!**

Bill: Thank you for mentioning *Pointed Sentences*. The book takes its name from a Samuel Johnson quote: "In every pointed sentence some degree of accuracy must be sacrificed to conciseness." I like that Johnson quote because it acknowledges the sparring of artistry and truth. Many of my poems enact the sacrifice Johnson mentions. Most of the poems in the volume came out of a burst of sustained creativity that started four years ago.

**Joani: What happened four years ago?**

A: Well, as I was driving home from work one evening, a wrench flew off a Com Ed truck and smashed my windshield. I had been writing steadily for many years, but that incident broke not just my windshield but something inside of me as well and, as a result, a lot of stuff came pouring out. Over time I poured that stuff into molds of my own making and it hardened into the poems that make up this book.

**Joani: Wow! A metaphorical bonk on the head! I'm glad it wasn't a real one. Back to the book: tell us a little about your experiences in the world of small press publication.**

Bill: Not many! It's kind of like fishing. You put your best bait on your hooks, drop a number of lines into the pond, wait patiently, and hope for a bite. I sent out my manuscript blindly to a number of publishers and was extremely fortunate to get an acceptance. I'm very grateful to Geoffrey Gatza of BlazeVOX for publishing my manuscript.

**Joani: Congratulations on being a fine fisherman then, Bill! I have noticed you've been a participant in a lot of poetry readings around the Chicago area lately. You've another coming up soon. I envy the seemingly vibrant poetry community you enjoy. Is Chicago as poet-friendly as it seems to me?**

Bill: Fortunate fisherman, you mean! Yes, I've had some opportunities to be the featured reader at a number of venues in the Chicago area. I really enjoy doing that and participating in open mics when I can. I've met many talented poets here. There are a lot of poetry readings, poetry competitions, poetry workshops, and writing groups in and around Chicago. I don't take advantage of them all, by any means. Chicago has The Poetry Center which offers many cultural programs and publishes *Poetry* and The Green Mill which hosts Marc Smith's well-known Poetry Slam, just to mention two famous examples. One poetry newsletter lists the "Top 135" of the "Chicago Poetry Scene"! Yes, Chicago is a very "poet friendly" city. There's almost always something poetry going on. AWP is going to be here at the end of February and beginning of March. I'm doing an off-site reading on March 2, 2012, with some poet friends from around the country—Kris Bigalk from Minneapolis, Gloria Mindock from Boston, and Tony Barnstone from Los Angeles. We'll each get to read for 20 minutes—I'm really looking forward to that.

**Joani: Amazing to me that Chicago is so supportive. I'd like to get back to a poem featured here, as its genesis interests me: "The Rest Nowhere" is full of literary allusion. In my finite wisdom, I caught the Pynchon nod of "a screaming comes across..." of course, but there are other allusions less obvious. Can you explain some of them and a bit about your process in writing this poem?**

Bill: I'm very interested in allusion and use it a lot in my poetry, but the thing about allusion is that its success is dependent on the reader's familiarity with the referent. In that way, it's even worse (because it's largely literary) than metaphor, which is similarly dependent on reader experience. I came across the Pound line "His true Penelope was Flaubert" early in college. It infuriated me! I hadn't read Homer and I had never heard of Flaubert! So allusion may be perceived as obnoxious or worse. You never know what effect it will have on readers. Even when we think our allusions

are obvious, they may not be. I wrote what I thought was a funny poem called "Ferdinand Gets Married." It begins "You have the right to remain angry / but anything you say can and will/ be used against you." The allusion was to Ferdinand, the young suitor of Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The joke in the poem is that Ferdinand is getting "mirandized" (i.e. read his rights) before he gets "Mirandized" (i.e. married to Miranda.) Very clever, Bill, but you forgot that not everyone in the world has read *The Tempest* and knows who Ferdinand and Miranda are!

So you ask me about "The Rest Nowhere" whose title is an obscure reference to a famous phrase ("Eclipse is first and the rest nowhere") in Thomas Babington Macaulay's review of John Croker's 1831 edition of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791). The rest of the poem has a number of specific allusions to Samuel Johnson (lines 3-8), a writer I love, a writer I've already mentioned twice in this interview! (Sources are Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Boswell's *Journals*, and Johnson's letters to Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi.) At an earlier period in my life, I was a budding Johnson/Boswell scholar. In addition to references to Johnson, there's a reference to Boethius (lines 12-13) and also The Twilight Zone (line 13). So what's it all about? Do you need to recognize and understand all these allusions to understand or appreciate this poem? God, I hope not! Then what's the purpose of these obscure and eclectic allusions? Writer's prop? Partly maybe. But what do they all mean? Let's let someone else tackle that one.

But I'm happy to talk about my process which is that I try not to think too much when I'm writing. Things come to me (can't help it—it's the nature of my education, my reading, my experiences...) and I let them, in consort with my feelings, lead me; I try not to lead with my head.

I was having stabbing headaches. The line echoing Pynchon occurred to me. I started thinking about the astounding mind of Johnson and then about Boswell (both given to crippling melancholy and depression).

The "great chains of being" line comes from the concept of *The Great Chain of Being* (see famous book by A. O. Lovejoy) but also the chains that Johnson asked Mrs. Piozzi to bind him with during his moments of severe depression (see Johnson's French" letter and W. Jackson Bate's reading of the episode).

I started thinking about the great chains of my being and of everyone's being, about diagnosis and consequence, about Johnson (I always seem to return to Johnson!), the Twilight Zone weirdness of any change, and the great loss Johnson's death was to his friend and biographer Boswell.

"The rest nowhere"—Macaulay meant that Boswell's biography was so great it eclipsed all the competition. The competitors didn't even come close.

I wanted also to suggest that perhaps there is no rest, not anywhere, from the screaming brain.

**Joani: I understand that impetus most writers are driven by to create and also the brain that won't turn off, even sometimes in the middle of the night when you have to turn on the light, grab a pad of paper, and write it all down before it's lost to slumber and the static stress morning ushers in.**

**Thanks for the interesting conversation, Bill. I enjoyed it much, and I look forward to having your book in my hands soon.**

#### A JOURNEY OF SEVEN THOUSAND MILES

I had studied the prohibitions carefully.  
We had been warned not to eat any raw  
fruit, but when I saw the bowl of red freckled  
apples that morning at breakfast, something  
ruinous came over me. Greedily, I grabbed  
an apple and cut it into fourths. The taste  
of what is denied us is sweet, and so are  
the careless acts that spell our doom. Love  
must have seemed so as it steamed out of  
the primitive soul. In the land of amorous  
gods who balance on bubbles of swift bliss,  
it is the elephant who most knows restraint.

#### FERDINAND GETS MARRIED

You have the right to remain angry  
but anything you say can and will  
be used against you. You have  
the right to your own opinion.  
If you can't afford an opinion  
an opinion will be provided for you.  
You have the right to be happy.  
If you can't afford happiness  
contentment may be made available.  
You have the right to consult your  
feelings, but your intelligence  
may not be present during questioning.  
Do you understand these rights? If you  
understand these rights, say, "I do."

#### THE REST NOWHERE

A screaming comes across the brain  
interrupted by a webbed memory:  
a man in brown with a rolling gait

stubbornly strong, a dull ghost  
(until spoken to), dusty and disgusting  
squinting towards wisdom. He holds his  
candles upside down and ambulates  
toward the great chains of his being.  
Stethoscope, please! (Silence.) No pulse  
on the body's horizon. I know too much  
not to invite delusion. Love's funny that way.  
When all else fails, look to the consolations  
of misanthropy. Up ahead, there's a signpost;  
down below, the rich ricochet of loss.

(These poems appear in *Pointed Sentences*, BlazeVOX 2012)

- **INTERVIEW WITH MEG POKRASS IN FICTIONAUT (2010)**

**Meg Pokrass: What poetry or book of poetry/or prose do you feel closest to?**

Bill Yarrow: Poetry: Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," that agent provocateur of poetry, for the profundity of its conceit, for its aphoristic brilliance, for its brave mixing of genres, for its messianic earnestness, for its rhetorical lunacy, for its invincible mission. Prose: Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion*, wait, I mean Beckett's *Watt*, no change that—Hamsun's *Mysteries*, that is to say, Machado de Assis's *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, not forgetting Byron's "Detached Thoughts", not ignoring Babel's *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Stories* nor Kawabata's *House of Sleeping Beauties*, all the while remaining a huge fan of Barthelme's *City Life*, how could I forget Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York*? I'm beginning to suspect that I don't have one answer to this part of the question, Meg. Maybe you noticed.

**Meg: Do you have a mentor/do you mentor?**

Bill: Well, I'm a teacher. Teaching is or at least seems inseparable from mentoring. At least one definition of a mentor is a teacher. Perhaps a better way to say this is that a teacher becomes the mentor to those students who stay students after the course is over. I maintain and treasure my relationships with many of my former students. I don't have and never had a formal mentor (thought I studied with a number of famous poets), just friends whose opinions I value and to whom I send my work. I guess I'm a mentor for those who send me their work and value my opinion. Fictionaut itself, if we look at in a certain way, is one gigantic mentor network. Maybe your question is really about who pushed me, who prodded me, who turned me into a writer. I guess my answer to your first question is also my answer to your second question.

**Meg: How do you stay creative? What are your tricks for getting unstuck?**

Bill: Creativity is a habit. You have to make it habitual. I don't mean writing every day; I mean being creative every day. I rarely get stuck. I like the idea of creativity expounded in Henry Miller's "The Angel is My Watermark" in *Black Spring* and in these lines from "Jabberwhorl Cronstadt" in the same volume: "The poem is the present which you can't define. You live it. Anything is a poem if it has time in it. You don't have to take a ferry-boat or go to China to write a poem. The finest poem I ever lived was a kitchen sink." I mean creativity in that expanded sense.

In terms of how to get unstuck, well, I think you have the right idea with your writing prompts being a string of unrelated words. Create a puzzle like that or of any kind and the drive to find a solution starts the engine which takes the car of imagining pretty far down the road of production. I am also a proponent of Rimbaud's derangement of the senses though for me it's not the cliché of drugs or alcohol; it's exhaustion. When I literally can't think straight, often it's then I'm best able to write. The key is getting to an altered state and there are a million ways to get to one. Balzac used coffee (so much it killed him.) Schiller used the smell of moldy apples in his desk to get himself going. Hemingway always stopped before he was ready to stop and thus insured his ability to pick up where he left off. I don't advocate the use of drugs or alcohol, particularly not to stimulate creativity — anyway I don't find the "creativity" produced by alcohol or drugs very interesting. Another way to get unstuck — read Rimbaud!

**Meg: What are your favorite literary websites?**

Bill: Project Gutenberg, the Internet Archive, UbuWeb — I know that's not exactly what you meant, but I derive a lot of literary pleasure from my visits there. I visit many literary websites (I don't want to name some and, through oversight, slight others) and they're all interesting, but the volume of admirable work, when taken as a whole, is overwhelming and unceasing. I can't keep up. I visit promiscuously whenever I can.

**Meg: How has being part of Fictionaut affected you as a reader/writer?**

Bill: Being at Fictionaut, I've come to love flash, feel plugged in to what is happening NOW in writing, have discovered new wonderful writing, writers, and PEOPLE (I think Fictionaut is more about people than it is about writing), have sharpened my taste, have enlarged my capacity for appreciation, and have been humbled by the honest infectious generosity of the Fictionaut community. As a writer, I mostly post, as Sam Rasnake does, only what I've had published, so I don't feel the venue has affected the kinds of things I write. I do, however, look forward to sharing my work on Fictionaut and seeing which pieces swim and which sink and trying to understand why.

**Meg: Discuss briefly the good and/or bad aspects of being a writer in the Internet era.**

It's all good. Easy access to publishing information, a proliferation of magazine and journal websites, no more printing, no more envelopes, no more stamps, email submissions, submission managers, Submittable, notification records, publisher promotion on the web of writers, broad or coterie dissemination of one's work, rubbing shoulders with everyone. Big tent by the big river. It's all good.

**Meg: What are you working on now?**

I write about three poems per week. At any one time I have between sixty and eighty poems out at magazines, often with long return times, six months to a year. I'm not in a hurry. When I hear, I hear. If I get rejected, I take the rejection as an opportunity for revision. When a piece comes back to me, I look at it with ruthless (and I mean ruthless!) objectivity. Nothing in it is sacrosanct. Anything can change and change radically. Tear down and build back up. "First dirty, then clean," said Beckett. I'm constantly tinkering—even with my published pieces. I'm shopping (but then who of us isn't?) for a publisher for a volume of my poems. Current title: *Florid Psychosis*. I wrote a work about ten years ago called *The Distillation*. It was a collection of 986 original aphorisms. I've been raiding it for my Twitter project—distilling *The Distillation* (as it were) into Twitter-sized saying and posting one a day. I'm coming up on two years now. I also do a lot with film and create my own film stills from public domain films. I have two film blogs ("Bill Yarrow Film Blog: All Things Cinema" and "Close Encounters of the Noir Kind") so some of my creative energy is expended there. I also do scholarly work. But that's another story!

• **INTERVIEW WITH ROXANE GAY IN PANK MAGAZINE (2010)**

*You can enjoy some really interesting work from Bill Yarrow in the July issue and he gives us some wisdom about the death of Satan in or lives, spiritual shell games, and love rituals.*

**Roxane Gay: Why is no one ever Satanless?**

Bill Yarrow: Because not enough of us are godless. Blake said "Brothels are built with the bricks of religion." Similarly, Satan is made out of the rib of God. They share the same DNA. No God, no Satan. It's that easy. Too much God, too much Satan. Let's get godless and forever put Satan to rest.

**Roxane: How would you play a shell game with spirituality?**

Bill: Devilishly.

**Roxane: If the devil lives in the house, how does God do a B&E into it?**

Bill: The Devil doesn't live in the house; he is the house. God, you're right, was born a burglar, stealing here, stealing there, stealing constantly. Even John Donne would agree, He's all about, breaking and entering.

**Roxane: What number are you?**

Bill: Number 9. Number 9. Number 9. Number 9.

**Roxane: Before making love, do you consult a pre-written list of moves you enjoy performing?**

Bill: No. Usually, I just shave.

GETTING GODLESS

I.

God is man squared. That is to say, God is man raised to a higher power.

Man is the root, the square root, of God.

We believe in the ideal (truth, wisdom, justice, honor, integrity, selflessness, sacrifice, compassion, goodness) and God is the name we give to that ideal.

What else is God but a heuristic for what we want to do with our lives?

The worship of God is the worship of perfection. The perfection of space: infinity. The perfection of time: eternity. The perfection of power: omnipotence. The perfection of knowledge: omniscience. The perfection of behavior: virtue.

Since the Fall, falling is what we've learned to do.

We are blemished perfections.

Man is the asymptote of what he predicates God to be.

We define ourselves by what we are trying not to be. Some men try to be men by not being womanly. Some women try to be women by not being manly. Some men try to be men by not being too manly. Some women try to be women by not being too womanly. People assert their humanness by differentiating it from brutishness. Man posits God's divinity in contradistinction to humanity.

Science teaches us that there is no one thing in the world, that everything is made of smaller and smaller substances. God's indivisibility draws a line in the sand against science.

Dostoyevsky said that without God, everything is permitted. Behind that statement is the correct notion that with God, anything can be prohibited.

God can be seen in man's ability to imagine God.

II.

We don't buy into God; we marry into Him.

Agnosticism: a philosophical position built not on belief or doubt but on an inability to decide.

An agnostic is a tepid thing, a spineless thing, a mushy thing.

The deists were atheists without the courage of their convictions.

Modern religion: *carpe deism*.

The atheist can't stop thinking about God. The religious man can't stop thinking about atheism.

The first millennium was a fight for freedom of religion. The second millennium is a fight for freedom from religion.

III.

Jealousy is a cocktail made of equal parts insecurity and possession.

Before we can be jealous, we must make our mate our thing.

*Our God is a jealous God.* What an unfortunate idea.

The God fantasy infantilizes man.  
We all want God to be happy. Is God smiling or is God frowning? That's what every religious war's about.  
Religion scares the hell out of you by scaring hell into you.  
Suggestiveness is not a god.  
What begins as respect ends as worship.  
Religion isn't about spirituality—it's about ritual.  
Religion is division.

IV.

Amulets. Lucky charms. God.  
Overseers. Consciences. God.  
Kings. Fathers. God.  
Policemen. Judges. God.  
Teachers. Authors. God.  
Accountants. Engineers. God.  
God—the Great Excuse.  
God—the Seatbelt of the Soul.  
Personal trainers. Personal bankers. Personal gods.  
God: a godforsaken construct.  
Heraclitus for God.

V.

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. God is Love. Same God.  
The Lord will rain for ever and ever, and, on that day, the Earth shall be wet and His name wet.  
All magic tricks look real. We are desperate to believe, but there's nothing to believe in. It's all sham. Embrace sham. Squeeze tight. It'll shatter and the world will be honest again.  
Numerology derives its meaning from manipulation. It's no less deceitful or entrancing than magic.  
Spirituality is a shell game.

VI.

The divine is our great wish. There's nothing objective about a wish.  
Prayer is affirmation of belief. Prayer as expectation of response is absurd *beyond belief*.  
Wishes are not real, but wishing is real. Dreams are not real, but dreaming is real.  
Thoughts are not real, but thinking is real. Belief is not real, but believing is real. The world is full of wishes, dreams, thoughts, and beliefs embodied, made real.  
As Jesus embodies sacrifice, as Buddha embodies renunciation, so God embodies meaning.  
I am the dream of my parents embodied. Everyone is a dream made real.  
There is no difference in effect between false belief and true belief. The effect of any belief is always positive.  
What is efficacious in belief systems is not the object of the belief (i.e. Jesus or Buddha) but belief itself. Believing in something is worthwhile even if the something is false.  
God is a cosmic placebo.  
Reality exists independent of our perception of it; on the other hand, reality does not exist *for us* independent of our perception of it.

VII.

A religious leader is a vanity mirror for his congregation.  
Religion exists to oppose the incursions of time.  
The odds, the minister believes, don't always favor the house. But in his heart of hearts, he concedes that in the long run the house always wins.  
We need to remember the devil lives in the house.  
Christian morality is the drawing of lines; it's a geometry. Judaism draws fences around

things and is concerned with the area under the curve; it's a calculus. Taoism is string theory.

The population of the world accepts unthinkingly the rightness of the religion or the atheism it is born into.

You want to worship the ideal (call it God), you want to believe it possible—go ahead. If it stretches you, if it makes you live up to something, great. Just don't smear it with the bullshit of personification and intentionality and intervention.

### VIII.

People are desperate to posit a soul—they need something to blame their good impulses on. The soul is a pilot light. When the light goes out, we inflate with combustible soullessness. Science's biological and chemical refutation of the mind/body split has killed the concept of soul in man. The death of the soul freed man from the fetters of shame.

If science really wants to understand spirituality and mysticism, it should begin by unraveling the phenomenon of *feeling* other people looking at us, the phenomenon of *feeling* being looked at, the phenomenon of *feeling* the eyes of someone walking behind us on our necks.

I don't believe in spirits or a spirit realm. I do, however, believe in thought. The brain is uncontained by the skull. Its waves leak out and interfere in the world. Ghosts, called spirits, are, more precisely, the coalescence of leaked thinking.

Exhaustion of the body frees the mind to wander in the spirit.

Soul—a comforting delusion.

### IX.

The person who eats his vegetables first is not morally superior to the person who eats his vegetables last.

There's no virtue that can't be vulgarized. Just as there are gourmets in eating, there are also gourmets in defecation.

Depravity doesn't evolve; it mutates.

Virtue can never be habitual. Goodness is a function of will.

Utility is always a value.

Awareness isn't an infinite good.

An ethics of expedience, not of obligation.

There are accomplices to virtuous acts as well as to crimes. What, in basketball, is called an assist, in morality, is called virtuous complicity.

Integrity, indistinguishable from intransigence or recalcitrance, is just a more exalted form of perversity.

The moral man brings up phlegm but does not spit it out.

### X.

Cause murks the morality.

Relativism is the philosophical justification of deviance.

To eliminate deviance, eliminate absolutes. For Dostoyevsky, the Absolute was the same as God. *If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.*

Morality is dependent on the notion of observation. God is watching, the police are watching, my neighbors are watching. It's only when we are alone that we indulge the impulse to do wrong.

If you want to construct a moral society, construct one where people are always in each other's presence.

*I'm Ok, you're OK* is the sniveling Laertes saying, *Exchange forgiveness with me, Hamlet.* I'll let you off the hook if you let me off the hook.

Morality is not a quid pro quo. Morality is washing our own dirty backs. *You wash my back and I'll wash yours* is no different from *you wash my backside and I'll wash yours.* The only difference is, in the second instance, the disgusting nature of the transaction is made clearer.

*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.* Quid pro blowjob. Morality is a refraining from, not an indulging in.

XI.

Understanding is dangerous because it results, inevitably, in forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a function of understanding. Understanding is the secret tunnel that runs from the head directly to the heart.

Empathy is denial of conscience, vilification of judgment.

Empathy is a form of enabling. It says, *Yes, yes, yes! I know what you mean. I understand how you feel.* Empathy is part of the conspiracy of all ideas, all beliefs, all feelings being equal. Empathy results in exculpation. It results in: "O Doctor Mengele, you poor man!"

Forgiveness is no virtue. It's the beginning of vice.

XII.

Before genetics, there were gods.

Gregor Mendel reinvented fate.

The modern determinist gods are heredity, environment, and culture.

Everyone alive is an exemplar of a triumphant fitness.

The debate between Athens and Sparta was really a unified argument in favor of nurture, in favor of the environment over heredity.

What's providence for one person is deliberation for someone else. The Corinthian messenger's volition tastes like fate to Oedipus.

Luck is the name we give to unwilled repetition.

The crosses and the stars you wear—magic amulets to protect you—from yourself.

Superstition is the name we give to the spurious cause of a legitimate effect.

The greatest superstition is a belief in providence or grace.

XIII.

Who invented virtue—I say the devil.

Who invented coherence—I say the devil.

Who invented pity—I say the devil.

Who invented forgiveness—I say the devil.

Who invented reward—I say the devil.

Who invented hope—I say the devil.

Who invented religion—I say the devil.

Who invented the devil—religion.

(This poem appears in *Blasphemer*, Lit Fest Press 2015)

Clare Martin interview

<https://mockingheartreview.com/archives/volume-1-issue-3/bill-yarrow/>

Gay Degani interview:

**Words in Place:** <http://gaydegani.com/>

Smashwords interview:

<https://www.smashwords.com/interview/byarrow>

Goodreads interview:

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2901759.Bill\\_Yarrow](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2901759.Bill_Yarrow)

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<http://www.bookpleasures.com/websitetublisher/articles/7679/1/A-Conversation-With-Poet--Prof-Bill-Yarrow/Page1.html#.V9LRxfkrLmH>

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Nicolette Wong interview:

[http://nicolettew.blogspot.hk/2014/07/conversation-with-bill-yarrow\\_24.html](http://nicolettew.blogspot.hk/2014/07/conversation-with-bill-yarrow_24.html)

Darryl Price interview:

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